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EPIC POETRY

Definition: An epic is a long narrative poem presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or a race.

Classifications of epic poetry: There are a number of ways in which literary scholars have attempted to classify the various types of poems that claim to be "epics". The following two systems are offered for your consideration:

I. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost* C.S. Lewis distinguishes between primary and secondary epic poetry:

Primary epic--poetry "which stems from heroic deeds and which is composed in the first instance, in order that such deeds may not be forgotten." It is practical in purporting to record historical events and deals with the real world, "however much glamour may be added in the process."

Secondary epic--poetry which may deal with heroic legend or with more abstract themes than the type available to primary epic, and which is composed, not as an historical record of the past, but as the poet's artistic interpretation or recreation of legend or theme. The combination of the poet's 'seeing eye' and his personal style together create something which is not based on reality, but has a life of its own to be transmitted to the mind of the reader."

These heroic poems have a number of common characteristics:

(1) the choice of stories from a time when a superior race of men lives for action and for the honor and renown which it brings;

(2) the realistic presentation of minor details to form a solid background.

(3) the use of the single line, instead of the stanza, as the metrical unit;

(4) the taste for speeches, often of some length, spoken by the different characters;

(5) literary devices to vary or assist the narrative, such as similes, repeated passages, and incidental stories;

(6) the reluctance of the poet to assert his own personality;

(7) the dependence on a tradition which is passed from generation to generation, and from poet to poet, and [which] supplies stories, themes, and language.

II. A more or less standard classification, in increasing use among literary scholars today, distinguishes between literary epic and oral epic poetry.

Literary epic poetry--poetry written and intended for a reading audience by a literate poet. This kind of epic often coincided with C.S. Lewis' "secondary" epic, and includes works such as *TheAeneid* of Vergil, *The Divine Comedy* of Dante, *The Fairie Queen* of Spencer, *Jerusalem Delivered* by Tasso, and *Paradise Lost* by Milton. On occasion, however, this category does admit a poem which seems to be "primary" in nature: this seems to be the case with both The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf*. In each case the literate poet depended heavily on an oral tradition, and created his poem to serve his community's need for records and values, rather than to merely entertain them with his artistic rendering of old stories. His poetry incorporates many elements that are characteristic of oral poetry, such as the use of formulas and repetition.

Oral epic poetry--heroic poetry that is composed for, and at the time of, oral performance. (All poems of this category would be considered "primary" in Mr. Lewis' schema). The *Odyssey* apparently belongs to this class of oral epic. Oral epic poetry differs from literary epic in (1) method of composition, (2) method of delivery to the audience, and (3) the role of the audience.

Some thoughts on oral epic: Literary epic poetry is poetry composed and written down by a literate poet, who works in the same way as you in writing an essay or a poem: he writes his thoughts down and revises and rewrites many times before he is satisfied that he has a finished piece. Literary epic poetry belongs to the kind of literature that we are familiar with: the kind you read in a book. Oral epic poetry is not the same as literary epic--even when it has been transcribed and written in a book. The oral poet does not compose a poem from written notes--in fact, it is rare to find an oral poet who able to read and write. For some reason, literacy and the ability to create poems or songs "orally" do not seem to go together. The oral poet actually composes his song at the very moment he sings it to his audience--it is not a matter of making a song up once and memorizing it verbatim and then repeating it at each performance. Each time a poet sings a particular song, he actually sings a song that is different. He does rely on his memory--but not for verbatim repetition of a song. Rather, he uses his highly trained memory and a flexible, highly traditional language.

This "traditional" language is a language within a language-a poetic version of the spoken language, which was developed over the centuries by generations of poets. What makes this language a poetic version is its highly formulaic character; that is, its basic units are formulas, and not merely words. Formulas are ready-made phrases, extending in length from a word or two to several complete lines, already adapted to the meter and either already adapted, or instantaneously adaptable, to the limited range of ideas which the subject matter of the epic may require the poet to express. Formulas are the basic building blocks of oral poetry. With an adequate stock of many thousand formulas, a poet is able to concentrate on what he wants to say; how he says it--i.e. the larger part of his fitting his ideas into the meter or rhythm--is nearly as automatic as the way we speak in an ordinary conversation.

But an oral poet needs more than formulas to compose his songs. He needs to know many different stories and he needs to master thousands of "themes". The term 'theme' is used to denote a general incident or story or stock description that has a specific structure, which the poet uses as is, or as he cares to elaborate them, in order to facilitate his telling of the story. For instance, when he wants to describe what happens before a battle, he can use a theme for the marshalling of armies--and he can use the same theme--with variations, if he wishes--whenever he tells of any battle; the fact that all or some of his details do not record accurate, historical "fact" would be of no concern to him. In fact, such a poet would not even understand our attitude about factuality. In *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*, two themes that are operative are (1) the hero's search for knowledge and (2) the hero's return home.

The use of formulas and themes not only help the oral poet, they also aid his hearers--who have only one chance to get this version of his song. Because the audience must hear and remember all important details, repetition is essential. Because an audience's attention may vary, the poet has to be quick to suit its need: he must be able to modify his story by being concise, when their interest in details is lagging, and he must be able to expand his narrative by means of descriptions, similes, and other details when an audience is eager for these. Thus the audience plays a great and very active role in the production of oral epic.

The oral poet uses a number of devices to integrate his material and style. How many of these can you note in the epics we are reading?

(1) prologue--an oral table of contents.

(2) technique of foreshadowing and flashback, when the poet used the in medias res procedure of telling his story--i.e. he plunges us right into the middle of the action, rather than beginning from the beginning.

(3) an inner armature of relationships which hold together the biographic, historical or genealogical treatment of the material.

(4) placement of summaries at various points to provide a recapitulation of the main theme(s) or previous events.

(5) ring composition--introducing and ending lengthy descriptions, speeches, digressions, with the same or variant words. This device brings an extended simile, a speech or digression ultimately back to the theme with which it had begun and enables the poet to continue his narrative without losing his audience.

(6) repetition of key words interlaced throughout the poem in order to bind themes together.

(7) repetition of certain key images, e.g. the sea.

(8) the use of divine intent to hold a story together.

The epics we are reading were descended from a long tradition of oral poetry. Internal evidence

enables scholars to demonstrate that the *Odyssey* is closer to that oral process than is the *Gilgamesh*. The *Odyssey* was created by its author at the time when writing was becoming common in Greece; and its author seems to have dictated his song to a scribe. *Gilgamesh*, though it is more than a thousand years older, was produced by a literate poet, in a highly literate society, who used pre-existing written, and perhaps some oral, materials.

Return to Monmouth College Classics Dept. Home Page